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ABSTRACT

This brief paper offers guidelines on recognizing giftedness in young children based on a study of the developmental characteristics of 77 gifted and average children as reported in parent questionnaires. The questionnaire asked parents to describe their children's development during the first 36 months. Major findings indicated that: parents of average children saw their children's development differently than did parents of gifted children; parents of the gifted tended to underestimate their children's abilities rather than to overestimate them; the two groups had similar socioeconomic backgrounds; there were few differences in physical development between the two groups; but there were major differences in intellectual, imaginational, and social development, as well as in talents and certain personality traits. Tables present questionnaire data which compare gifted and average children on general characteristics, skills, interests, and personality/social traits. (DB)

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Recognizing Giftedness in Young Children

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The question of whether we can recognize gifted children at an early age is embedded in a larger issue: how much of a child's giftedness is attributable to nature and how much to nurture. When the nature/nurture question was first raised, its author, Sir Francis Galton (1869), declared that nature was responsible for all of one's abilities. In American science and education, a backlash occurred for most of the 20th century in which nurture became the primary determinant of intelligence. Today, the pendulum has swung back to more of a middle ground and now we recognize that nature and nurture are co-parents of intelligence. Children show the signs of giftedness or advanced development early in life, but whether those gifts flower into high achievements in adult life is dependent upon the nurturance they receive from their environment. Despite Madison Avenue, you just can't create a gifted child from scratch like Yuppie pasta.

This article is based upon a comparative study of the developmental characteristics of gifted and average children (Rogers, 1986). The information was gleaned from 77 parent questionnaires; many of the parents had detailed records of their children's development (such as baby books or doctor's records). Contrary to the belief that all parents think their children are gifted, this study indicated that the parents of average children do see their children's development differently from parents of gifted children. In addition, the parents of the gifted tended to underestimate their children's abilities rather than overestimate them. The two groups had similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and there were very few differences in physical development found between them. However, there were major differences in intellectual, imaginational and social development, as well as in talents and certain personality traits.

As you read the following descriptions, remember that each gifted child is different. Certain characteristics will apply to your child and some will not. If you see that several of these characteristics fit your child, you may wish to seek further assessment of your child's capabilities so that you can nurture those abilities.

EARLY SIGNS OF GIFTEDNESS

Parents were asked to describe their children's development during the first 36 months. (See Table 1 below.)

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED AND AVERAGE CHILDREN AS DESCRIBED BY THEIR PARENTS

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	Gifted	Average
Very Alert	67%	42%
Long Attention Span	31%	3%
Excellent Memory	67%	27%
Rapid Learner	58%	13%
Advanced Vocabulary	87%	34%
Very Observant	64%	34%
Very Curious	58%	40%
More than One Imaginary Companion*	50%	9%
Vivid Imagination	46%	22%
High Degree of Creativity	66%	8%

***for those reporting imaginary playmates**

One of the earliest signs of giftedness noted was alertness. One parent said that when her child was seven months old "he was watching Sesame Street so intently that when he finally fell asleep he was still watching and just fell over backwards." Another parent wrote, "He literally consumed his world with eagerness, wanting to learn, see, feel and touch everything, all at once."

Another early sign was long attention span. One parent commented, "He would play games longer than playmates and get upset when they stopped playing and would leave." A second reported, "She would work on a puzzle or a book for over a half-hour when she was only two."

Over 90 percent of the parents of the gifted saw their children as having an excellent memory. One gifted girl knew most of "Little Orphan Annie" at age two, and another memorized the order of the books of the Bible by age four. Well over half of the parents in the gifted group perceived their children as rapid learners. The speed at which gifted children learned generally became apparent by the time these children were three years old. One girl could count to 20 at 18 months of age, and could say her ABCs at age two. Another mother wrote, "Before she went to kindergarten, she taught herself to paint and was writing in sentences. When she started kindergarten, she became disillusioned."

Nine out of ten parents of the gifted reported advanced vocabulary development in their children. Parents noticed extensive vocabulary in their gifted children by the time the children were three. One parent kept a record of 100 words that her boy spoke by the age of 18 months. While none of the parents of average students gave examples of any specific words, parents in the gifted group mentioned such examples as: "delicious" and "incredible" at age 2; "Rudolf was ostracized by the other reindeer" at age 2.5; "incidentally" at age 3. One 3 year old prefaced sentences with, "Well, apparently..."

Two-thirds of the parents of gifted children found their children to be very observant. Many parents mentioned that their children "really noticed details." One child knew how to get to the park and the library by the age of three. Sixty percent of the parents of the gifted said that their children were curious. Most of the parents of the gifted observed their children's curiosity by the

age of 2 ½, about two years earlier than parents of average children.

Almost all of the gifted children were perceived by their parents as asking "probing" rather than simple questions. At the age of 18 months, one child wondered, "What is air? How high up does it go? Why doesn't it all float away?" A three-year-old boy wanted to know how airplanes work and how people breathe. Another three-year-old asked, "Will I still be me when I grow up?" Global and abstract issues occupied the minds of several of these youngsters. One child asked detailed, probing questions about politics, nuclear war, world peace starvation, pollution, energy, and so forth.

IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY

Imaginary playmates showed up in both groups, but only one child in the average group had more than one of these playmates, while gifted children often had several of them. One child's imaginary friends included, "Jesus as a young boy. He appeared most often when 'B' was afraid, lonely or frustrated. They carried on lengthy conversations." Another child had a "family that lived in the pan cupboard: David, the father; Kookoo, the mother, and Baby Dew. They later had another baby, Rose. David died. She also had a teen-ager sister, Hallelujah." One parent wrote, "Being an only child, 'C' had "Imaginary Friend" (that was his name) to play board games, etc. Not surprisingly, Friend always lost. "Over two-thirds of the parents of the gifted described their children as creative and imaginative, and about half had observed signs of vivid imagination in their children before the age of three. One parent recollected:

> **At about age three, 'D' wanted a certain toy and his Dad told him to get a job and earn the money. He immediately went to his room colored about 10 pictures and took them around the block, selling them door-to-door. Most people gave him 10 to 15 cents for them because of the story he told them. We only knew our immediate neighbors, so we wondered what our other neighbors thought of us!**

TABLE 2

SKILLS DEMONSTRATED BY GIFTED AND AVERAGE CHILDREN

	Gifted	Average
Recognized Letters by Age 2	56%	33%
Recognized First Word by Age 2	31%	15%
Sight Read Easy-Reader by Age 4	50%	22%
Sounded Out New Words by Age 4	42%	13%
Solved a 20-Piece Puzzle by Age 3	81%	40%
Showed an Interest in Time by Age 2	24%	5%
Told Time in Hours by Age 5	61%	28%
Counted to Ten by Age 3	52%	24%
High Degree of Math Understanding	40%	8%

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Many gifted children show an intense interest in books at an early age. (See Table 3.) One parent reported, "at 13 months, she would drag one of us to read with her and sit fascinated until the whole book was read." By the time these children were in third or fourth grade, three-fourths of them continued to be interested in reading, compared to one-fourth of the average group. Almost half of the parents of the gifted students describe their children's interests in reading as "intense." A mother of a third grader wrote, "She always loved reading. She likes Poe, Shakespearean quotes, poetry, Shel Silverstein, Charlotte's Web, etc." A fourth-grade boy sought out "Encyclopedia Brown mysteries, anything on Einstein or a composer, especially Beethoven." Several of the parents of the gifted mentioned that their children enjoy informational books compared with only one such reference in the average group.

TABLE 3

INTERESTS SHOWN BY GIFTED AND AVERAGE CHILDREN

	Gifted	Average
Intense Interest in Books	46%	10%
Interest in Math Games	48%	16%
Interest in Puzzles	91%	64%
Interest in Calculators	36%	13%
Interest in Computers (Not Video games)	90%	47%
Many Talents	16%	3%
Great Number of Interests	74%	50%
Willing to Invest Time in Interests	49%	19%

Significant differences were found in the ages at which gifted children recognized letters, recognized words, sight read, and sounded out new words as compared with average children. These differences are shown in Table 2.

Almost all of the gifted group liked puzzles. (See Table 3.) Four out of five gifted children could put together a 20-piece puzzle by the age of three. One child could put together a 100-piece puzzle between the ages of four and five, and a very precocious youngster could solve a 500-piece puzzle at the age of three "but became quite frustrated," according to the parents. One parent gave us a fascinating account:

> **He could tell by the shapes how to put the puzzle together and memorized the shapes of the puzzle pieces very fast; then he would turn the pieces and work the puzzle upside-down.**

About one-fourth of the gifted group showed an interest in time by the age of two. One parent wrote, "he had a play watch when he was two and we would work on how to read it and what it all meant; he would always want to know how long things would take to do." Another parent reported that his child became "obsessed" about knowing what time it was, what day of the week it was, and the date. Almost two-thirds of the gifted group told time in hours by the age of five.

Parents of average children limited their descriptions to the age at which their children told time, while parents of gifted children often described the way their child related to time as a concept. Though competent at telling time, gifted children often seemed to lose track of it when involved in other activities.

By age three, more than half of the gifted group could count to ten. Consistent differences were also found between the groups in interest in math games, calculators and computers. (See Table 3.) Five times as many gifted children as average children were reported as having a high degree of understanding of mathematical concepts. One child was able to do double digit addition in his head in first grade and was pressing his parents to teach him division in kindergarten.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

The majority of the parents of the gifted group described their children as having a great sense of humor. (See Table 4.) Of the nine parents who mentioned puns, only one was in the average group. One parent indicated that at five her daughter became a punster, joking about "symbols" and "cymbals." Another parent said that her son appreciated adult jokes and understood them from the time he was around four years old. He liked adults better than children from the time he was two or three.

TABLE 4

PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL TRAITS OF GIFTED AND AVERAGE CHILDREN

	Gifted	Average
Sophisticated Sense of Humor	64%	40%
Intense Reactions to Frustration	51%	24%
Perfectionistic	56%	21%
Chooses Older Companions	31%	12%
Likes to Play Alone	37%	10%
Great Concern with Morality and Justice	36%	8%
Acts Mature for Age	77%	37%
Highly Competitive	23%	1%
Strong Leadership Ability	36%	16%

Over half of the gifted sample showed intense reactions of frustration and seemed perfectionistic to their parents. None of the gifted group were seen as reacting "mildly" to criticism. Anger was the most common reaction to criticism reported. One of the areas of perfectionism often mentioned by parents had to do with academic concerns. Both groups said that their children tended to be more perfectionistic in areas of interest (which did not include cleaning their rooms). Gifted or not, they still don't want to clean their rooms.

None of the average students chose friends much older than themselves, whereas one-third of the gifted students chose older playmates and 15% chose much older companions. Parents of the

gifted group often remarked that their children tended to spend time with adults, where this was not mentioned by parents of the average group. More than one-third of the gifted children were comfortable playing by themselves. Parents of gifted children often mentioned that their children enjoyed spending time alone reading.

Many gifted children showed great concern for morality and justice. Some of their parents discussed global issues with them, whereas this wasn't mentioned by parents of average children. Although concern for fairness was mentioned by parents in both groups, it was a predominant factor reported by the parents of the gifted sample.

Other differences found between gifted and average students in this study showed gifted students to have more talents, greater maturity, higher intensity of competitiveness in several areas, greater leadership ability, greater number and intensity of interests, and greater willingness to invest time and effort in their interests than their same-age peers.

A FINAL WORD

If your child fits a large number of these characteristics, it is a good idea to keep records of early achievements to assist later identification. Four years old is not too young to have your child tested by a qualified examiner. Make sure this individual is experienced with gifted children. Because their minds are developmentally advanced, gifted children need to be given early exposure to games and activities designed for older children. It is important to find environments that address your child's unique potential. As one parent in our study stated, "When educational needs are met, other problems improve." These children need time with others like themselves so that they can find true peers with whom they can relate.

Once you discover that your child is gifted, cautions must be taken so that you neither hide nor flaunt his or her giftedness. One can lead to atrophy of abilities and the other can lead to social and emotional problems. Early recognition and nurturance of giftedness will increase your child's chances of achieving happiness and fulfillment in adult life.

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Kindness in words creates
confidence.
Kindness in thinking creates
profoundness.
Kindness in giving creates love.

-Lao-tzu-

We thank you for exploring
the world of giftedness with us.

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